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Journal of Vocational and Technical Education

Editor:Kirk Swortzel: kswortzel@ais.msstate.edu**Volume 12, Number 1****Fall 1995**[DLA Ejournal Home](#) | [JVTE Home](#) | [Table of Contents for this issue](#) | [Search JVTE and other ejournals](#)

PERSPECTIVES ON WORK FROM RURAL PARENTS WITH DIFFERENT LEVELS OF EDUCATION

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Abstract

The purpose of this exploratory study was to determine: (1) work perspectives from parents with three levels of education and located in an economically and geographically disadvantaged Appalachian county and (2) how they see their role in the vocational guidance of their children. In-depth interviews were conducted with 34 respondents with varying educational attainments. These were content analyzed to see if differences existed. Respondents with high school educations or less held unfavorable views about work, considering it hard and tiring. Parents with some college or vocational training voiced more positive views, considering work rewarding and self-fulfilling. However, all parents were concerned about their children's careers and most expressed concern that they could not guide their youth into appropriate vocations without help from schools.

PERSPECTIVES ON WORK FROM RURAL PARENTS WITH DIFFERENT LEVELS OF EDUCATION

Research indicates that parents have an important influence, perhaps the single most important influence, on the career and job choices their children make (Kotlik & Harrison, 1989; McCracken & Odell, 1988; Otto & Call, 1985; Splete & Freeman George, 1985). Daniels, Karmos, and Presley (1983) find that while parents' roles are unrecognized by school officials, parental influence is preeminent in children's career decisions. The

authors recommend that parents be recognized by school personnel, who could develop programs to utilize parents' work experiences and expertise. However, research also indicates that to be effective in vocational guidance, parents need knowledge of career paths and development ([Schergens, 1980](#)).

Although parents have the most influence on youth, they may be restrained by factors beyond their control such as culture and economics. [Osipow \(1968\)](#) states that it is almost impossible to try to develop a theory of vocational development without considering cultural and economic factors. An isolated geographical location may hinder exposure to a wide variety of jobs and careers.

More specifically, [Phelps, Raftery, Mulkey, & McNamara \(1980\)](#) find that socioeconomically disadvantaged families in rural Appalachia do not have access to resources that middle class parents have. Also, they find the following characteristics of lower income families: more evidence of broken homes, friction due to one family member in jail, less frequent travel, less access to educational materials, and parents often enrolled in basic literacy or GED courses.

Rural students represent approximately thirty percent of all students enrolled in high school ([National Center for Educational Statistics, 1981](#)). It is important to identify work perspectives particular to rural parents with varying levels of education. Further research to determine how rural parents view work and their role in influencing their children's future career could lead to knowledge that will enable vocational educators to better help rural students.

Purpose

There is little knowledge concerning rural parents at varying educational levels, their perspectives about their children and work, or their thoughts on their roles in vocational guidance. The purpose of this exploratory study was to determine what parents in a socioeconomically disadvantaged rural area thought about work, their children and work, and their roles in vocational guidance, and to seek out meaning that may be used by those in vocational education to build and test theory. This study was also intended to gain insight into differences in beliefs among parents with different educational levels.

Review of Literature

[Lutz, Lutz, & Tweeddale \(1992\)](#) contend that rural education has values that are unrecognized by reformers and business people who want to make it more urban. They predict that rural education is in danger of becoming extinct. Rural education is unique in that it is more responsive to the needs of its population. Educational reforms of the 21st century may deprive us of our rural heritage and history.

The characteristics of rural schools are diversity, isolation, and small enrollments ([Perry & Harmon, 1992](#)). These features are endangering the survival of rural schools. The researchers looked at the costs and benefits of maintaining rural schools from the viewpoint of a rural state. Should the aim of rural education be to prepare students for the local economy or the world economy? Currently, the curriculum of rural schools does not prepare students for additional education or for work in metropolitan settings.

[McCracken, Barcina, and Wims \(1991\)](#) recently studied aspirations of 12th grade students from rural communities in Ohio and Southwest Georgia. They concluded that rural schools have some definite advantages over urban schools including the support they receive from the community, the degree of satisfaction of the parents with the education of their children, and the establishment of a good environment in which to learn. They also find that rural youth often aspire to higher status jobs than those held by their parents.

[Resche and Knierim \(1987\)](#) administered survey questionnaires to ninety rural sophomore and junior high school students and their parents. Although they found that parental influence is extremely hard to define and measure, results revealed significant differences between students' and parents' perceptions of parental influence on career choices. Generally, about half of the students rated their parents' influence as high; however, only a fourth of the parents thought so. According to [Kotrlik and Harrison \(1989\)](#) students perceive

that their parents have more influence on their career choices than others. And, the influence of the mother is stronger than that of the father. [McCracken and Barcina \(1991\)](#) studied the relationships between the occupational and educational aspirations of rural and urban students. Students and high school principals in Ohio were surveyed. Specific findings were that expectations of students in rural areas are not high as those of students in urban areas and parents of rural students were less likely to expect their children to attend college.

Ironically, [Otto and Call \(1985\)](#) state there is a lack of education designed to help parents assist their children in planning work and career choices. [Bratcher \(1982\)](#) suggests that the important influence of the family on career development has not been given enough credence by schools. Several family factors affect career decisions and career path development of young students such as, geographic location, socioeconomic status, and attitudes parents have toward work ([Splete & Freeman-George, 1985](#)). Geographic location often limits the exposure of many youth to a variety in jobs and career opportunities. According to [Phelps, Raftery, Mulkey, & McNamara \(1990\)](#) rural lower socioeconomic parents are unable to provide resources and the guidance that youth need in attainment of vocational success.

[DeYoung and McKenzie \(1992\)](#) evaluated a rural school district in Appalachia and found that it is important to understand that education is influenced by the area's culture, history, economic conditions, and local politics. Attention must be given to all these factors. It has been argued that the area's economic ability is tied to lack of appropriate values and attitudes toward work. Although education has been the focal thrust of many states that have large rural areas, this goal must take top priority if improvement in rural education is to occur.

[Haller, Monk, and Tien \(1993\)](#) hypothesized that students from large urban schools with varied curricula would be more proficient in higher-order thinking skills than students from rural schools with fewer course offerings. This hypothesis was tested using data from the Longitudinal Study of American Youth (LSAY) for the years 1987-89. The researchers focused on measures of higher-order thinking skills in science and mathematics. The hypothesis was not supported. Rural and urban students performed equally well. The researchers conclude that it is possible that these abilities are either innate or formed early in life due to child rearing practices.

[Hedlund \(1983\)](#) interviewed twenty adolescents from a rural high school to find what it is like to live in a rural community and the importance of adult interactions. Hedlund found that most rural adolescents would like to remain in the rural community, work there, and raise families there. In recent years there has been an out-migration of youth from rural to urban areas. Research has indicated that rural youth who remain in their home town communities are not as success oriented as those who leave. They feel safe and connected. But, they lack privacy and develop social biases. Also, parents who listen to their adolescents, set boundaries and standards and are seen by their adolescents as concerned and supportive.

[Haller and Virkler \(1993\)](#) contend that the important aspect of self-identity in adolescence from a rural community point of view is occupational aspiration rather than educational aspiration. It has been assumed that students from rural areas have lower educational aspirations than their nonrural counterparts. Haller and Virkler found very little difference and that it may be attributed to socioeconomic status of the two types of families.

[Smith, Beaulieu, and Israel \(1992\)](#) researched the effect of human capital and social capital on drop out rates in the South. Variables studied included family human and financial capital, family social capital, community human and financial capital, and community social capital. Financial and human capital characteristics of family influence the drop out behavior. The community human and financial capital had no influence on the drop out rate. Of the five indicators of family social capital (number of siblings, mother working, both parents in household, mother's college expectations, and student talks with parents) only one, whether the student talks with parents was not statistically significant. An important indicator of drop out behavior is the students' perceptions of the mother's college expectations.

The socioeconomic status is also important in the educational attainment of young adolescents. Children from lower socioeconomic status are not as likely to value education as are children from higher socioeconomic strata. Other advantages are tools such as home computers, privacy in the home, and additional tutoring.

The proportion of persons with less than high school educations is considerably higher in the South than in the other three major regions of the nation ([U. S. Statistical Abstract, 1988](#)). According to [Miller \(1993\)](#) rural America is distressed. The nonrural population is more educated than the rural population. Other problems in rural America are geographic location, dependence on urban centers, and low population density. The continued out-migration of the young and better educated from rural areas weaken already distressed rural communities.

In summary, the way parents view the world of work influence the formation and development of their children's values and attitudes about work. If parental needs, values, and attitudes are positive toward work, children are likely to adopt positive perspectives. This study was undertaken to add further information about how a small sample of rural parents at varying educational levels view their own work, their children and work, and their roles in vocational guidance.

Methodology and Sample

This exploratory study involved in-depth interviews of thirty-four parents of youth between ages eleven through seven teen, the age span considered to be the career exploration stage ([McDaniels & Hummel, 1984](#)). During this time frame, youth are gathering information and making vocational and educational decisions that affect their adult lives. A small sample was used to better utilize the potential of qualitative data and to accommodate time demands. An Appalachian county that was considered to be economically and geographically disadvantaged was chosen.

Subjects from three educational levels were identified by a local high school principal and invited to participate if they had at least one child in the career exploration stage. Each was a resident of the county and willing to participate in the study. Mothers and fathers were invited to participate as well.

The parents were categorized by their educational attainment so that responses could be analyzed to determine if differences existed in perspectives of work. Of the thirty-four respondents, fifteen had some college or vocational training, twelve had high school educations, and seven had less than high school educations.

A variety of jobs were held by the respondents seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Listing of Jobs by Educational Levels

Some College or Vocational Training	High School Education	Less than High School
Nurse	Machine Operator	Construction
Deputy Sheriff	Assistant Plant Manager	Auto Parts Inspector
Secretary	Stock Room Clerk	Accounting Technician
Counselor	Day Care Worker	Receptionist
Teacher	Quality Control Engineer	Factory
Sales	Logger	Garment
Lab Technical	Material Handler	Packing
Bookkeeper	Factory	Drill Press
	Shirt Assembly	Punch Press
	Sewing Buttons	

An open ended structured interview format was used to allow parents to express fully and completely their views and perspectives concerning work and their roles in vocational guidance.

Some questions centered around the concept of work such as "What comes to mind when I use the word 'work'?" and "What kind of job do you want your child to have?" Other questions dealt with how parents thought about their children and work ("Have you ever thought about the kinds of work your children are likely to do?" and "What kind of preparation do you think they will need?"). A third set of questions centered around what parents think they could do to guide and prepare their children for work and the importance of school in career development. [Patton \(1980\)](#) says the use of interviews allow more information to be gathered from the other person's perspective. Interviews give more descriptive detail and reveal similarities and differences among the samples.

A local married couple who lived in the county and were able to build rapport with the respondents were hired to conduct the interviews. The principal researchers conducted training sessions including pilot testing of the interview schedule. Responses were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim for purposes of content analysis ([Patton, 1980](#)).

The population of the county at the time of the 1990 Census approached 5,000, the number of households was 1,800 and the growth rate between 1980 and 1990 was 2.5% ([Tennessee Statistical Abstract, 1991](#)). The per capita personal income for 1988 was \$9,941 while the per capita personal income for the state was \$13,867. Approximately 22.3% of the residents were considered to be in the poverty range. Sixty-eight percent of employees were in the manufacturing sector, and the unemployment rate was about 7.6%.

Results

Results from this small sample of thirty-four indicate that rural parents' perceptions of work, their children and work, and their role in guidance vary according to different levels of educational attainment. Parents with less education were more likely to consider work as hard and to fear the hardships of work for their children. Parents with some college or vocational training focused more on the meaningfulness of work. All parents tried to instill desires to do the best one can in a job one likes.

Meaning of Work

Work is a very important part of the respondents' lives, but meanings of work seem to vary according to educational level. Respondents with less than high school educations described work in unfavorable ways. Most focused on the monetary benefits of work, such as that their pay was not enough, and that work was a necessary evil.

People with less than high school educations worked mainly in factories and construction. Responses from this group revealed they had acquired fatalistic views of work:

- I don't like to work.
- I get very tired of it.
- Something I will do until the day I die.
- I learned it's hard. That's about it, I guess.

Parents with high school educations also stated that work was something that one had to do to live and that it was hard: "it's rough," "security," "it's something you have to do to live," and "it's better to have any job than to be unemployed." Many parents mentioned that they would like to see their children have better jobs than themselves.

Respondents with high school diplomas held a greater variety of jobs than those who had not been graduated. But, they showed little enthusiasm about their jobs:

- Work is hard and it's hard to work with the public.
- If you don't work, you don't get paid.
- It's hard to make it.
- Well, I wished I had went further in school so I wouldn't have had to work so hard.
- I learned that there is different kinds of people to get along with. I have learned that you have to take a little as you give. You have to take it if people are (sic) angry, smart-mouthed, to get along with them, that's just work.

More lengthy and descriptive comments about work were given by those with higher educational levels. Those with some college or vocational training expressed some of the same sentiments as the other two groups (money, way to pay bills, to eat) but did not stress economic necessity as much as psychological satisfaction.

The third group talked about work in much more detail than did the other two groups. One advised "getting a better education so you can do something better." Responsibility and getting along with people were mentioned by many as essential. However, even the more highly educated parents revealed some less than positive answers: "The more you do the less you get paid" and "You do not always get paid for everything that you do." Pride in a job well done was echoed by the most educated parents:

- I mean you do everything that you see needs to be done whether it is in your job description or not.
- I must put everything into the job in order to do it right; well, mainly if I don't do it, it does not get done.
- Working for myself, I am the hardest person I have ever worked for.

Do rural parents with various educational backgrounds wish for their children the types of jobs they now hold or have held? Six respondents who had less than high school educations said "No."

Only one answer was a possible "yes" i.e., "I have a good paying job and a good job. The money is good and it takes a little know how to do it." The twelve respondents with a high school education also voted "no" to having their children follow in their footsteps.

Examples of their comments include:

- I would much rather them have better jobs.
- I want them to not to have to work as hard as I have worked.
- I want my children to have better opportunities than I had.
- I don't want to see them be stuck in a shirt factory like I have had to do.
- I would like to see them have better jobs, with not so much stress such as a computer programmer, pharmacist, and something with retirement and good benefits.

Nine of the fifteen respondents with some college or vocational training said that they did not want their children to have the same kind of jobs they had. Comments ranged from the hope that their children would strive for something better to the need for additional training and education in order to get better jobs with more money. One nurse said that when she was going through training, there were very few male nurses, but now it is very acceptable and that she would be pleased if her son chose nursing as a career. Overall, parents with high school educations or less were more negative about work; however, most parents of all levels want their children to have jobs different than theirs.

Work and Their Children

All respondents affirmed that they had talked with their children about work. Subjects with less than a high school education talked about places that were hiring and some characteristics of being a good employee. Comments included:

- You cannot get by in life without working.

- I talk to them all the time. They can't get by in life by just hand to mouth.
- A lot of it you wouldn't want to hear but I told them how hard it is and what kinds of jobs I had that were rough.
- Yes, to make sure they follow orders and be dependable.

Respondents with a high school education were concerned about the hardships of a job, sticking to a job, and the responsibilities of the job. Many answered that their children would need education and training to make it, although they did not give particulars about the education and training needed. One parent said "sometimes you have to take jobs that you do not like because of money."

Parents with some college or vocational training gave more descriptive answers than the other two groups. A few commented on the hierarchical nature of work, saying their children must "do what the boss says." More frequent responses focused on responsibility and appropriate respect for authority. One parent responded that she told her children:

To be a responsible person. We were brought up that we had to do chores. On Saturday, we did not turn the television on until our chores were done. We didn't go to school in the morning until the dishes were done, our beds made and the house had to be straightened up. They don't; they get up and I make their beds, which is my fault. I don't know what you are supposed to do, you are not supposed to spank them, I don't reckon anymore. Kids need more responsibility; that's what is wrong with most kids today. It's just different than it used to be. Everything is handed to them. They get up and come in here and turn on the television instead of doing their work. I don't understand it.

Another parent said: "Absolutely, everyone will work. It is not a God given right to sit on your duff. We must decide what we are best at, what we like and enjoy, and work toward our goals. We must grow and work towards something to attain in life." One stressed that she had not only talked with her son about her work, but had also taken him with her on home visits as a nurse.

What kinds of work do parents visualize for their children?

In the group with less than high school educations, replies were either general such as "one that pays more money," and "just something that makes them happy," or specific jobs such as "veterinarian," "nurse," "doctor," "lawyer," and "secretary." One parent said that without a high school diploma, one would not be able to get into the plant where she worked.

Four of the twelve respondents with high school educations stated that they had not thought about work for their children. Specific responses were: "doctor, a doctor's job is dependable," "any white collar job," "veterinarian," "truck driver," or "police officer." General responses focused on getting jobs with which they may be happy and which will not kill them.

Of respondents with some college or vocational training only one had not thought about work and their children. Specific job opportunities mentioned for their youth were of the white collar variety such as engineer, teacher, doctor, computer programming, lawyer, and astronaut. Many said that a job did not matter as long as one could be satisfied with it, maximize use of skills and training, and make good money.

Parents with less than high school educations thought their children would need education in preparation for work, but they gave no specifics about how much or what type of education they would need. From the group with high school educations, the responses centered around education and training in general. One said that in addition to a good education, his child would need "nerves of steel." Another stated that her son would need all the computer classes available.

The group with some college voiced some of the same responses as the group with high school educations. Training and education beyond high school were imperative. One gave an example of how she was teaching her daughter responsibility. The daughter had started playing ball. When she wanted to quit, her mother

would not let her because quitting is what a lot of people do when the going gets tough. Another revealing response was:

I have always insisted that they not be slack in choosing classes of a high level. Also, seeing they do their best in elementary school. I tell all the kids, they have a job just like mom and dad do. They go to work and bring home a pay check, just like mom and dad do. Their job is going to school and their pay is how much they learn. That's my whole philosophy of what I teach my children.

When questioned about hopes for their children and work, parents focused on two major points, a job that pays more and one that would make them happy. Many answered with specific occupations such as doctor, lawyer, nurse, secretary, teacher, engineer, computer programmer, or CPA.

Respondents with less than high school educations made some statements that were unrealistic such as "become a millionaire and not have to work." Other responses were somewhat more realistic. "Yes, I would like for them to have more than what I had when I was brought up. They have a lot now. More than some children do. But I would like for them to have more. I want job dependability." Perhaps this is due to the fact that parents' work is often not dependable (such as being laid off when work in a factory is slow).

The main hope of respondents with some college or vocational training was that their children do something they like and are successful at. The value of a college education was strongly voiced by this group. One parent hoped that her son would be fortunate enough to find something that "doesn't seem like work." When asked how they define work success for their children, those with less than high school answered: "getting a good education," "application of self," "follows her dreams," "if he sets his mind and best effort into it," "is good with people," and "simply doing the job." Answers from the group with a high school education were fairly consistent with the first group and included: "they like their job," "finishes school and get some additional training," "tries hard," "is honest and goes everyday," and "the child listens to what the parent tells them." Respondents with some college or vocational training stated: "if he enjoys what he is doing," "applies himself and keeps a cool head," "takes it seriously," "gets along well with people," "learns that there is give and take in the workplace," and "you have to want success for yourself, you do not want it for somebody else, you have got to want it for yourself." Many answers put the responsibility on the child and indicated the belief that success was a long term goal to work toward.

Parents' Roles in Vocational Guidance

How do parents describe their own roles in the vocational guidance of their children? Responses from subjects with less than high school educations centered around teaching responsibility early in life, encouragement, being supportive, and making them stay in school.

Specific comments include:

- They should be trained early in life that they have responsibilities.
- Encourage them.
- Make them stay in school.
- Yes, encourage and support them. Tell them to be honest, be on time, don't miss work, and have a good record.

Parents with high school educations overwhelmingly stated that their role was to help their youth stay in school. They believed that was the source that would guide and prepare youth for work. They also said that children should be taught responsibility and given encouragement. One parent said:

- Encouragement. Encouraging young adults can convince anybody. I don't care how intelligent they are, by telling them over and over how dumb they are, you can convince them that they are dumb. Encouragement, even small mistakes won't even (sic) stand in their way. Encouragement really does go a long way.

Again, parents with more education voiced the concern that responsibility and encouragement were strategies that parents can use to guide their children into appropriate vocations. Several in-depth and revealing comments came from this group:

- Absolutely, do not come home griping about your job all the time. Yesterday, my son asked me about his classes for next year. So I got the hand book and ran a copy of the classes for 9th grade students. I gave it to him and told him to look at it and think about it a lot. Make a plan.

One shared an example that she used in guiding her son:

- You have two guys standing out there on a construction job, one of them is down in the bottom of this ditch shoveling out mud, the other guy is standing on top of the ditch watching him. Which one would you rather be? The one in the ditch or the one standing on the top? The one on the bottom never finished school and the other one did.

Summary and Implications

Work is a very important aspect of rural life; therefore, all efforts need to be made to provide rural youth with the tools and knowledge to make good career and vocational choices. Because of their influence, parental views on work and vocational guidance must be considered. This study implies that rural parents are very concerned about work in their children's lives. This small qualitative study yielded much valuable information from a small Appalachia county. Of course, findings cannot be generalized to rural America. They may be used as bases for further research about rural parents and their adolescents.

Parents' personal outlooks on work seem to vary according to their educational levels. Perspectives on work of respondents with high school educations and less tended to be more unfavorable. Respondents with some college or vocational training tended to voice more positive views, extending beyond work such as duty and paying the bills to work as self-fulfilling. How these differences affect children need to be studied further.

Although rural parents with a wide range of educational levels are concerned about the career futures of their children, they may not have as many tools to guide children as they would if they had more parent education. This study supports previous research. Parents are interested in youths' work futures. But it also indicates that rural parents, at least those with less education may not have positive attitudes toward their own work or resources to best help children make wise work choices ([McCracken & Odell, 1988](#); [McDaniels & Humphrey, 1984](#); [Osipow, 1968](#); [Resche & Knierim, 1987](#)).

Rural America contains approximately one-fifth of the nation's population and a significant percentage of the nation's economic activity ([Stephens, 1992](#)). According to [Miller \(1983\)](#) even though the poverty rates of rural residents are higher than those of urban residents, the rural poor have certain advantages. They are more likely to own their own home, they pay less to raise their children, and their annual cost of living is lower. [Stephens \(1992\)](#) contends that rural America is very diverse and that policy analysts should take this into account as they deal with fiscal and other issues.

Rural school counselors and vocational teachers should recognize that in rural America educational systems and programs should be designed to educate parents about future job markets and skills and competencies that will be needed by their youth. [The Maryland State Department of Education \(1984\)](#) utilized a brochure to help parents provide career awareness and guidance. Various methods should be applied in rural schools to involve parents in career education and the making of satisfying career choices.

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Last modified: 12/10/09 10:47:20 by Zulfia Imtiaz